

Chapter One

The Social Construction of Lesbian Feminism

At least since the early twentieth century, when the medical profession in Europe and the United States both pathologized and popularized the concept of homosexuality, poetry has been central to the self-conscious construction of European American lesbian identity and community.¹ The self-reflective possibilities of the lyric and the mythmaking potential of the epic surely play a role here, but the importance of poetry for white lesbians rests largely in the historical figure of Sappho, poet of Lesbos. While Radclyffe Hall adopted the sexologists' terminology to plead for acceptance in her novel *The Well of Loneliness*, Renée Vivien and Natalie Clifford Barney, Hall's contemporaries in the lesbian literary subculture of 1920s Paris, translated and rewrote Sappho.² Vivien and Barney even attempted to create a community of women on the isle of Lesbos, geographically and symbolically linking lesbians and lesbian writing to the central figure of lesbian mythmaking. The idea of Sappho, whether or not the actual woman was what we would call a lesbian today, has been central to white lesbian identity and community because her presence in history provides a foundation on which lesbians could build a lineage: connection to the past (both mythic and historical), connection to others, and the possibility of surviving into the future.³ Some lesbians of color also look to Sappho as an ancestor, although many rely on the history and spiritual traditions of their own ethnic heritages. For example, Audre Lorde incorporates the West African Yoruba tradition and names herself "zami," a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers in her mother's homeland of Grenada. Gloria Anzaldúa writes about indigenous Mexican figures from Coatlicue to Malintzín/La Chingada and names herself the "new mestiza." The dominant white culture's name for all women-loving women comes, not surprisingly, from classical Western culture rather than from any of the many cultures of people of color now living in Europe and the Americas.

In *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement*, Margaret Cruikshank explains that the desire to create a tenable lesbian/gay history is linked to “self-esteem. . . . Lesbians [throughout history] took great pride in the sixth-century poet Sappho” (28). In 1955, Daughters of Bilitis, which would later become the first national lesbian organization, took its name from Pierre Louys’s *Songs of Bilitis* (*Chansons de Bilitis*, 1895), a book of poems about an explicitly lesbian, fictional character named Bilitis, supposed to have been a student of Sappho of Lesbos.⁴ In the 1970s, when lesbian culture flourished publicly on a large scale for the first time, Sappho’s name was everywhere. In *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love presented “A Liberated View of Lesbianism.” A short-lived newspaper in Brooklyn was titled *Echo of Sappho*; another was, simply, *Sappho*. Suggestive or creatively reconstructed fragments of Sappho’s poems were printed on posters for sale at women’s bookstores. A political button proclaimed, “Sappho Is Coming.” In the mid 1980s, Judy Grahn traced a lineage of lesbian poets back to Sappho in *The Highest Apple: Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition*. Grahn names Sappho, Emily Dickinson, Amy Lowell, H.D., and Gertrude Stein as “historic foremothers of today’s Lesbian poets,” a multicultural group including contemporary writers Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Olga Broumas, Paula Gunn Allen, and Grahn herself (xix).

Through poetry as a vital locus of cultural meaning, lesbians have self-consciously created lineage, history, and identity. In this sense lesbian-feminist poetry is a social constructionist project. While some lesbian feminists, especially in the late 1970s, undeniably tended to essentialism, early radical writers questioned the institution of heterosexuality and self-consciously worked to create lesbian identity and community. Diana Fuss’s explanation of the extent to which constructionism and essentialism are interdependent provides a key to understanding my contention. Particularly in the context of political movement, Fuss explains that all essences are constructs of historically and politically situated language. All essentialisms are therefore what the philosopher John Locke termed “nominal essences . . . not ‘discovered’ so much as assigned or produced—produced specifically by language” (Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 5).

In lesbian-feminist writing it is clear that “lesbian” is a nominal essence in this sense; that is to say, lesbian is a socially constructed category. However, over time this construct became more rigidified in practice, in some communities leading to censure of certain lesbian behaviors and ideologies. As a result, many queer theorists in the 1990s dismissed lesbian feminism wholesale as an unsophisticated, essentialist politics. Chapters 2 through 6 of this

volume trace the construction of lesbian in the work of five lesbian-feminist poet-theorists—Judy Grahn, Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Gloria Anzaldúa—pursuing what Fuss suggests ought to be the central question asked by students of identity politics: “not ‘is this text essentialist (and therefore “bad”)?’ but rather, ‘if this text is essentialist, *what motivates its deployment?*’” (xi). Following Gayatri Spivak, Fuss validates the strategic use of essentialisms “by the dispossessed themselves,” as having the potential to be “powerfully displacing and disruptive” (32). If essentialism itself is a social construct, if in that sense we can only speak of essentialisms (plural), then, following Fuss, one must acknowledge the possibility of “deploying” an essentialism in a politically progressive sense rather than “lapsing into” essentialism in a purely reactionary stance (Fuss 20).

Lesbian feminists have both deployed and lapsed into use of identity categories, however, and it is for the latter that they are most well known today. Consequently, Fuss (and many others) have “some serious reservations” about the provisional deployment of essentialisms, since “there is always a danger” that a strategic wielding of an essentialism “may, in fact, lead once again to a re-entrenchment of a more reactionary form of essentialism” (32). As Shane Phelan notes, “The radical critique [of heterosexuality] notwithstanding, the drive for self-justificatory explanation [i.e., unrepentant essentialism] has also operated freely within lesbian feminism” (Phelan, “(Be)Coming,” 771). Pitfalls aside, Phelan and Fuss both conclude, with Spivak, “that the ‘risk’ is worth taking” (Fuss 32). As I argue throughout *Identity Poetics*, that “risk,” as taken by a variety of lesbian-feminist writers, laid the groundwork for the poststructuralist theories of lesbian subjectivity that came to dominate academic lesbian discourse by the 1990s.

In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*, Lillian Faderman explains that lesbian feminists in the 1970s created community by building cultural institutions based on what seemed to be “a consensus . . . about what the broad configuration of the Lesbian Nation would finally look like: a utopia for women, an Amazon dream” (218). Much of the early theorizing of lesbian feminism took place in literature and performance no less than in political essay-writing. “Lesbian-feminists believed in the beginning of their movement that the commonality of committed lesbianism would be sufficient to help them build a unified lesbian community,” and for all types of theorists—literary, activist, academic—“language became important . . . as an indication of political awareness and as a tool to raise consciousness” (Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 218, 219). Critic Harriet Malinowitz acknowledges that despite the often enormous

differences she sees between lesbian feminism and queer theory, it must be conceded that being “selective or inventive about the language systems and discursive rules within which we compose ourselves”—a seemingly post-modern goal, on the face of it—“*has* been a major endeavor of lesbian feminist work” (“Lesbian Studies,” 267). Lesbian-feminist writers, artists, and performers self-consciously created lesbian community—a social constructionist project—based upon readily available definitions of women and lesbians. At times lesbian-feminist theories seem to strategically deploy the identity categories; elsewhere they rely on what Faderman terms a “unity [that] seemed easy to attain” (*Odd Girls*, 218).

Farwell reminds readers, however, that lesbian-feminist identity constructions “refuse any simple essentialism” as they consciously reposition “the subject in relation to other women, a repositioning which connects the lesbian subject to the categories of gender and, simultaneously, disturbs them” (Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots*, 90). Using contemporary theoretical language, Farwell explains that “the lesbian-feminist construction of the lesbian subject concentrates on positionality, on the ‘between’ space and the direction that is revamped when one woman faces another instead of a man” (92). Just as she explains the social construction of lesbian feminism’s seeming essentialism, Farwell points out that “the fluidity of lesbian sexuality described in many postmodern theories has become its own essentialist construct” (101).

Paramount in the construction of lesbian-feminist theory and culture in the 1970s was the establishment of periodicals and publishing houses, which were able to distribute lesbian-feminist literature and political theory to women living outside major urban centers (Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 224–26). Among the first books published were collections of poetry, and nearly every grassroots newspaper published poems as well. Carol Seajay, editor of *Feminist Bookstore News* and a founder of the Women in Print movement in the mid 1970s, recalls that because of the proliferation of women’s newspapers, “I got to read [Grahm’s poem] ‘Edward the Dyke’ sitting in my own living room in Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1973” (Seajay, “Women-in-Print Movement,” 54). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, cutting-edge lesbian-feminist “ideas were very much in poetry . . . and poetry was published in the magazines and newspapers” (Seajay, “Women-in-Print Movement,” 42). The first lesbian press on the West Coast, the Women’s Press Collective in Oakland, was cofounded in 1970 by Grahm and later included other poets as well. Seajay and Grahm recall that “the poetry and the grassroots organizations” came first, followed by a few newspapers, and then the boom in women’s publishing generated by the establishment of women’s presses and bookstores (Se-

jay, "Women-in-Print Movement," 56–57). Cruikshank emphasizes "the crucial importance of writing in gay culture" and notes the role of small lesbian- or gay-owned presses (*Gay and Lesbian*, 128–29).

Within the lesbian literary and cultural boom of the early 1970s, poetry was particularly important. In "Culture Making: Lesbian Classics in the Year 2000?" Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz compares "women's poetry in the early seventies" to "shakespeare [*sic*] in his own time" or "the audience for rock in the late sixties"; in their own context each was "extremely popular, the best . . . exploding with mass energy and creativity" (24). Cruikshank agrees, "Women's poetry readings have held a special place" in lesbian culture; she cites Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Judy Grahn as "among the most respected figures" (136). In her 1993 study of the political uses and institutionalization of lesbian poetry, Sagri Dhairyam elaborates on the poets' participatory role in the creation of communal lesbian identity: "[The lesbian] poet is not only the person who creates a literary text, but overlaps with the person who reads, who participates in a ritual for identity. . . . Poetry is an integral mode of willing communal identity in women's gatherings (Dhairyam, "House," 47, 57).

Grahn herself has called poets the "map makers" of lesbian feminism, "going out first and laying down the dimensions of the terrain and what the landscape (and the future) could possibly look like" (Seajay, "Women-in-Print Movement," 61). Lorde makes a similar point in her essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury": "[Poetry] lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before. . . . In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real" (Lorde 38, 39). Grahn reports that "masses of women" attended lesbian-feminist poetry readings in the early days of the movement, and that "fifteen years later . . . 'the movement' still keeps one ear to the ground to hear what else its poets may be telling." According to Grahn, "The leadership exerted by Lesbian and feminist poets as the mass movements of women developed during the 1970s cannot be exaggerated" (Grahn, *Highest*, xviii, 71).

Grahn's and Lorde's assessments are not self-aggrandizement. Critics—from academic journals to feminist newspapers—attest to the importance of lesbian-feminist poets in defining lesbian identity and lesbian community, that is, as I have contended, in self-consciously constructing and politically deploying the identity categories lesbian and woman. Estella Casto, in her study of Sexton, Rich, Lorde, and Broumas, concurs that feminist and lesbian poetry "demonstrates how poetry can be a means of political agency" ("Reading Feminist Poetry," 17). In 1981, Jan Clausen went so far as to call

feminism—including, but not limited to, lesbian feminism—"a movement of poets." Clausen questions what she sees as the pervasive, sometimes counterproductive, strategies of feminist and lesbian poets in the 1970s in her pamphlet-essay, "A Movement of Poets," the most comprehensive treatment so far of lesbian-feminist poetics. Clausen considers lesbian poetry to be the driving force behind the larger phenomenon of "feminist poetry," which is the subject of her study. She begins with the proposition that not only has feminism made feminist literature possible but that the reverse is also true:

Any serious investigation of the development of contemporary feminism must take into account the catalytic role of poets and poetry; that there is some sense in which it can be said that poets have made possible the movement.

It might even be claimed, at the risk of some exaggeration, that poets *are* the movement. Certainly poets are some of feminism's most influential activists, theorists, and spokeswomen; at the same time, poetry has become a favorite means of self-expression, consciousness-raising, and communication among large numbers of women not publicly known as poets (3).

The feminist poets of whom Clausen writes are similar in that they name themselves feminist, and they "confirm that identification through the radicalism of their vision, and frequently their activism." She explains that most of the poets she considers "feminist" in this sense are "lesbians of color, non-lesbian women of color, white lesbians"; only "a few are straight white women. . . . Few are academics; fewer still are academically respectable" (5).

Clausen provides a brief history of poetry in the movement, illustrating its widespread publication both in journals and underground presses, and charting its development from the "I am a woman" theme of the early 1970s to "I am a lesbian" by mid decade (15). Despite her appreciation of the transformative power of politically motivated feminist poetry, Clausen laments the relative lack of serious criticism, which she sees as a failure to scrutinize what Adrienne Rich in another context called "the assumptions in which we are drenched" (15). Clausen sees several feminist imperatives that she fears trivialize poets and their work, to the point of being responsible for a diminished vitality of and audience for feminist poetry by the early 1980s (31). She draws "a caricature of feminist poetic practice" to highlight the expectations that she thinks induce self-censorship in politically active, aspiring poets (17). Ironically, Clausen's caricature amounts to a typology of the strengths

of early lesbian-feminist poetry, articulating characteristics that had perhaps gone stale by the beginning of the 1980s:

Feminist poetry is useful.

Feminist poetry is accessible.

Feminist poetry is "about" specific subject-matter: oppression, woman-identification, identity. It avoids both traditional forms and distancing techniques. . . . It is a statement of personal experience or feeling, with the poet a first-person presence in the poem.

Feminist poetry is a collective product or process.

Where feminist poetry is concerned, criticism is politically suspect—or irrelevant.

The world of feminist literature is sufficient unto itself; the feminist poet need look no further for inspiration, audience, or support. (17, 22, 24, 25, 27, 29)

By the time this caricature came to seem like an actual repressive (or "politically correct") code, feminists of color, among others, were raising explosive, productive challenges to movement orthodoxies and hierarchies with increasing frequency and visibility. Clausen's essay was originally published the same year as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, a collection she sees as signaling "the most significant development for feminist poetry in the past few years . . . the emergence into public voice of a large group of feminist poets of color" who were "creating a movement-within-a-movement of great power and vitality" (31).

In "The Re-Vision of the Muse," Mary J. Carruthers draws a definition of lesbian poetry from her readings of Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language*, Lorde's *The Black Unicorn*, Grahn's *The Work of a Common Woman*, and Olga Broumas's *Beginning with O*. Carruthers writes that "among them, these volumes articulate a distinctive movement in American poetry. . . . I call this movement 'Lesbian poetry,' because the 'naming and defining' of this phrase is its central poetic preoccupation" (Carruthers 293). Carruthers views lesbian poets, of all the poetry movements of the 1970s, as having "the moral passion of seer and prophet" (299), which they bring to the task of establishing "a new *civitas*" (302) through the reinvention of mythologies in the creation of a new lesbian epic (300). Carruthers's "new *civitas*" is "predicated upon familiarity and likenesses, rather than oppositions"; it is troubling "to the general public" in its "use of the lesbian bond to signify that wholeness, health, and integrity which are minimized or negated by the

death-devoted sickness of male-inspired civilization" (304). Both in "The Re-Vision of the Muse" and her earlier essay "Imagining Women: Notes Towards a Feminist Poetic," Carruthers opposes the antiromantic imagery and diction of much lesbian love poetry to the physically "alienated," "confessional" style of earlier woman poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

In her poststructuralist psychoanalytic look at "Lesbian Poetry and the Reading of Difference," Liz Yorke locates the poetic articulation of lesbian identity particularly in the erotic ("Primary Intensities"). She argues that "the language of poetry especially lends itself to the lesbian-feminist poet's strategic and combative project," which is to displace and rename images of sexual otherness pervasive in dominant culture (158), that is, "writing and theorising the female body as a positivity rather than a lack" (165). Yorke sees lesbian erotic poetry as offering a positive subjectivity with which lesbian readers can "identify" (158) in both a political and a Lacanian-psychological sense. "The lesbian [learns] to love and identify with herself in the affirming field of meaning of the lesbian Other. . . . [It] is, at deepest levels, the mirroring discourse of the lesbian *lover* which enables the lesbian subject to *make* herself, to identify herself" (192). For Yorke this psychological development is no mysterious process of the unconscious but rather "a crucial strategy for a lesbian poetics" (165).

Existential or Essential? Lesbian Identity Theory in the 1970s

The pejorative tag *essentialist* has stuck to lesbian feminism despite the decades-old preoccupation of lesbian poets and critics with definitions and constructions of lesbian identity, and despite more recent postmodern understandings of the strategic deployment of provisional essentialisms. Within LGBT studies the essentialism/constructionism debate has been claimed by "queer theory," which tends to characterize 1970s lesbian feminism as unreflectively essentialist, when it is addressed at all. In fact, early lesbian-feminist writers were not only participants in the social construction of lesbian identity, they were actively engaged in a version of the essentialism/constructionism debate itself. Faderman explains that in the late 1960s and early 1970s there were two strains of lesbian-rights activism, essentialist and existentialist. "Essentialists," who were likely to refer to themselves as "gay women," believed they were born homosexual and that their problems came from society's attitudes toward homosexuality; they were more likely to be aligned with the gay liberation movement than the women's liberation

movement. Lesbian feminists, who “believed they ‘existentially’ chose to be lesbians,” argued that the problem was society’s attitudes toward women, and that lesbians suffered the extreme of that sexism (Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 189). The lesbian-feminist writer Carol Anne Douglas goes so far as to state that the “essentialist” position that sexual orientation is genetically determined “is more commonly held by gay men than by lesbians.” Her assessment goes beyond Faderman’s assertion, but Douglas does agree that “lesbians who see their lesbianism as predetermined . . . more often . . . identify as gay women than as lesbian feminists, and they are more likely to belong to gay groups, if they belong to any political groups, than to radical feminist or lesbian feminist groups” (Douglas, *Love*, 138). Just as essentialist lesbians earlier in the century had been boosted by sexology’s claims that they were “born that way,” lesbian feminists’ existential argument was bolstered by the mental health profession’s “minimalist definition of mental health,” which depathologized homosexuality (Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 202).

In the 1990s, the political Right appropriated the radical idea that homosexuality is a “chosen lifestyle” in order to vilify those who would make the choice, ignoring the corollary critique of heterosexuality as less than natural itself. LGBT academics tend to espouse more complex and politically progressive constructionist theories than those forwarded by political conservatives; however, in response to the Right the predominant view now voiced outside the academy in many LGBT communities (and in the media) is the essentialist position. Much like Radclyffe Hall in the 1920s, these contemporary essentialists argue for civil rights based on the minority status that is their due because they were born gay. Their political strategy ignores the history of invasive and even violent psychiatric “cures” foisted upon homosexuals earlier this century.⁵

In the 1970s, lesbian feminists confronted the heterosexism of the women’s movement and the essentialism (and sexism) of the gay liberation movement with the declaration that any woman could choose to be a lesbian. Writing in the 1990s, when “homophobia” became a household word, Cruikshank reminds readers that in the 1970s “simply naming heterosexuality and considering it as an institution was liberating. . . . The next step was to conceive of lesbianism as . . . a possible choice for large numbers of women. . . . Lesbianism could then be viewed as more than a personal preference; it was a stand against male domination” (*Gay and Lesbian*, 150). Faderman argues that lesbian feminists “took a revisionist approach to essentialism. It was true, they said, that lesbians were born ‘that way.’ But actually *all* women were born ‘that way,’ all had the capacity to be lesbians, but male

supremacy destroyed that part of most women before they could understand what was happening.” Lesbian feminism did not deny “primary” or “essentialist” lesbians but rather encouraged all women to become “elective, existentialist lesbians” (Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 206–7).

The early lesbian-feminist manifesto “The Woman-Identified Woman” asked, “What is a lesbian?” and answered with a rhetorical flourish illustrative of both Faderman’s point and Fuss’s explanation of the deployment of essence: “A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion” (Radicalesbians 240). According to Douglas, “The Woman-Identified Woman” was the first expression of lesbianism as political strategy (Douglas, *Love*, 144).⁶ A small but vocal number of heterosexual feminists followed the Radicalesbians’s lead, going so far as to declare themselves “political lesbians.” Best known for this stance is the radical feminist writer-activist Ti-Grace Atkinson, whom Douglas calls “the first non-lesbian radical feminist to acknowledge the political importance of lesbianism in the [women’s liberation] movement.” Douglas notes that in the early 1970s Atkinson “called herself a political lesbian until lesbians told her they felt the term did not recognize the specificity of their experience” (Douglas, *Love*, 143).⁷ Once heterosexuality was understood as an oppressive institution, lesbianism could be construed as a conscious, political choice—“feminist theory in action” (Abbott and Love, *Sappho*, 136)—revolutionary both in its rejection of men and, more important, in the central value it placed on women. “In this respect,” Faderman explains, “the 1970s offer a prime example of sexuality as a social construct” (*Odd Girls*, 207–8). Zimmerman concurs. Commenting on “Lesbians in Revolt” (1972) by Charlotte Bunch, one of the architects of lesbian-feminist theory as a member of the separatist Furies collective, she points out that “Bunch is positing a constructionist, not essentialist, argument. Feminists are not essentially lesbians, any more than lesbians are necessarily feminists. To state that feminists must become lesbians assumes that lesbianism is a matter of choice and conviction, not biological conditioning or sexual behavior” (Zimmerman, “Confessions,” 162).

The commonality of “lesbian experience” was assumed by too many white lesbians in the seventies, but by the end of the decade any easy sense of sisterhood in the women’s and lesbian-feminist movements was straining under the massive weight of differences among feminists in particular and among women in general. The radical-feminist tenet that all oppression stems from sexism simply did not match the experiences of many women; after a decade of the women’s liberation movement, they made it clear that focusing on sexism alone would not solve the problems of racism, classism,

and homophobia in the world at large or in the movement itself. While white middle-class women continued to hold most positions of feminist institutional power in the 1980s, lesbian feminism and the wider women's movement became largely focused on the agendas of women of color and sex radicals. The two watershed events in this gradual progression were the publication in 1981 of *This Bridge Called My Back* and the Barnard College sexuality conference in 1982. *This Bridge* was the first book of writings by and about women of color primarily addressed to each other rather than to the white women's movement. The Barnard conference was the originary moment for the "sex wars" raging around pornography and sadomasochism.

According to Phelan, by the time the sex wars and organizing by women of color were in full swing, the early radical/constructionist focus of lesbian feminism had largely slipped into essentialist interrogations of the true meaning of lesbianism. Widespread belief among lesbian feminists that lesbians are the best feminists, that no one but a lesbian can be trusted as an ally, that all systems of discrimination derive from sexism, and that therefore racism and sexism are less of a problem for lesbians than for others "served as the basis for codes of authentic lesbian existence and identity. . . . Whether explicitly separatist or not, these theories have worked to turn our communities inward rather than to propel us toward alliances and coalition with others" (Phelan, "(Be)Coming," 766). In other words, narrowing definitions of "lesbian" generated from some quarters of lesbian feminism have left out many lesbians who feel disenfranchised (or merely affronted or repulsed) by rigid definitions of lesbian identity and politics. Simply stated, "While the second wave of feminism in the 1960s originally provided a powerful discourse for lesbians, that discourse eventually manifested its limits" (Phelan, "(Be)Coming," 779). In her attempt to negotiate between experiential specificity and postmodern strategic posturing (which reads somewhat like a plea for a truce among warring factions), Phelan makes clear that contesting ideas of lesbian identity remained a problem in the nineties: "Lesbians should not refuse the specificity and reality of lesbian experience; neither should we reify our experience into an identity and history so stable that no one can speak to it besides other lesbians who agree on that particular description of their existence" (786).

Faderman attributes the factionalization of the lesbian community in the 1980s on the one hand to the movement's successful creation of social space, in which less radical (or merely different) lesbians felt safe to come out and join the political fray, and on the other to infighting born of some lesbian feminists' intolerance of anything less than strict adherence to unofficial but

widespread rules governing behavior, appearance, and politics. The utopic dream of Lesbian Nation “was doomed finally to failure,”

because of youthful inexperience and inability to compromise unbridled enthusiasms, but nevertheless it helped to change the meaning and the image of lesbianism by giving love between women greater visibility and by presenting visions of self-affirmation through lesbian-feminist music and literature (*Odd Girls*, 220).

Faderman identifies class, race, separatism, and sexual behavior as the main focuses of “factions and battles” that had developed within the lesbian community by the 1980s. All were issues that could not be resolved by lesbian feminists’ “excessive idealism,” “unrealistic notions,” and “little capacity for compromise” (*Odd Girls*, 236–40, 231–32, 243–44). Oddly, Faderman spends an entire chapter discussing the sex wars, squeezing a discussion of the remaining disputes (along with several others) into a single chapter.

Whereas Faderman singles out the sex wars, Linnea Stenson argues that “despite other problems in Lesbian Nation . . . the difficulties for lesbians of color who were expected to integrate a primarily white lesbian-feminist movement played a large part in the failure of that experiment” (Stenson 186). Chela Sandoval agrees, explaining that although *This Bridge Called My Back* “made the presence of U.S. third world feminism impossible to ignore on the same terms as it had been throughout the 1970s,” lesbian feminism did not instantly become multicultural and antiracist; rather, the increased presence of lesbians of color led to new strategies for the marginalization of women of color in feminist discourse (“U.S.,” 5).

“Problems of Exclusion” in Lesbian History

Despite the evidence that lesbian feminism in the 1970s proved unable to cope with the diversity of its own constituents, there is a more complex history to be told about the movement than a straightforward narrative of intolerance and utopianism would suggest. The “official stories by which the white women’s movement understands itself and its interventions in history” (Sandoval, “U.S.,” 5) provide only part of the picture, serving to erase the history of lesbians of color while vilifying all white lesbian feminists for a particular type of narrow vision. The current trend in LGBT studies and activism is to elevate queer theory and politics to a privileged position from which to sneer

at lesbian feminism, which is seen as outdated, rigid, and intolerant. This bias might be appropriate if by now “the movement” had entirely repudiated the aims and ideas of the 1970s; then one could argue that contemporary activists and academics need only learn what was bad about lesbian feminism so as to avoid repeating history. But many of the same radical ideas are still circulating—sometimes in more or less their original forms, sometimes only in part or reformulated in poststructuralist language.

In her 1992 essay, “Sisters and Queers: The Decentering of Lesbian Feminism,” sociologist Arlene Stein typifies 1990s queer avant-gardism. She calls for looking at “the process by which movements remake identities” (36), seemingly unaware of how her own essay remakes 1970s lesbian feminism. She begins with the premise that lesbian feminism was ideologically, if not geographically, a centralized movement, operating upon a “fundamental hegemonic logic” (35). That is, despite the utter lack of organization on a national scale, according to Stein lesbian feminism somehow had unified, definable goals and methods. It is perhaps because of this assumption that Stein is able to declare the “end” (36) of lesbian feminism, out of whose ashes she thinks a more sophisticated notion of lesbian identity has arisen. And perhaps because her research was conducted “primarily in the San Francisco Bay Area” (35), Stein ignores the continuing influence of (sometimes separatist or cultural feminist) lesbian feminism throughout the United States, Canada, and beyond. She implies that as goes San Francisco, so goes the lesbian world, and all for the better. Her bias is against those lesbian feminists in the hinterlands, “nonurban areas, where the pace of change may be slower,” that is, where lesbian feminism is still firmly entrenched (35). By Stein’s own admission, then, it seems that stodgy old lesbian feminism is alive and well all over the place.

Sisters, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation, a 1993 anthology edited by Stein, labors so diligently to dethrone lesbian feminism that the movement’s continuing influence is apparent. While a few excellent essays provide insight into the intersections of race, class, and sexuality,⁸ the dominant theme of the collection is hostility toward a stereotyped version of 1970s lesbian feminism. Declarations of the rigidity of lesbian-feminist ideology are repeated so frequently that they take on an air of accepted truth, but what is missing from Stein’s and most of her contributors’ perspectives is in-depth analysis and historical substantiation. If lesbian feminism has fallen into disfavor with so many (especially younger) lesbians, how and why has this happened? By the middle of the book, statements like this one, from Stein’s “Androgyny Goes Pop: But Is It Lesbian Music?” are merely redundant: “Les-

bian feminists attempted to universalize the possibility of lesbian experience by removing its grounding in biology, but in its place they often created rigid ideological prescriptions about who belongs to the lesbian community" (108). Had Stein detailed what she means by "the lesbian community," or specifically which lesbian feminists create what ideological prescriptions and the means by which these rules are enforced, she would have provided a much needed analysis of the current state of lesbian affairs. As reviewer Sarah Schulman points out, Stein instead offers a collection nearly obsessed with "dis-sociat[ing] from seventies feminism. And for all [the contributors'] combined credentials in academia and on the street, none are able to step back far enough to ask why" (24). (Apparently chastened by critiques like Schulman's, Stein repudiated her blanket antilesbian-feminist stance in her next book, *Sex and Sensibility*: "In retrospect, my book, among others, appears overly critical of lesbian feminists' excesses and insufficiently appreciative of some of their contributions. It also tended to homogenize the legacy of lesbian feminism, which was far from seamless and monolithic" [4].)

Faderman's tone is more moderate than Stein's critique in *Sisters, Sexperts, Queers*, and she provides ample historical evidence and analysis to support her claims. But Faderman, too, seems relieved that lesbian feminism—seen as a "revisionist essentialism" (Freedman 16)—appears to be dead. Faderman writes,

The women-identified-women who hoped to create Lesbian Nation in the 1970s failed in their main goal . . . a goal born of excessive idealism. . . . Their failure was inevitable not only because of their unrealistic notions, but also because, like most true believers, they had little capacity to compromise their individual visions (*Odd Girls*, 243–44).

Faderman implies that few, if any, lesbian feminists (or separatists) were left after 1979—and curiously, she fails to place herself in this history, although she came out in the mid 1950s and started doing lesbian academic work in the mid 1970s.⁹ However, she does note the successes and contributions of lesbian feminism—chief among them the raising of consciousness toward more widespread lesbian self-acceptance, the identification of gay liberation as sexist and women's liberation as homophobic, and the creation of "women's culture" (*Odd Girls*, 244).

Two other recent works of lesbian history appear to represent those lesbian feminists whom many scholars and much popular gossip consider obsolete. Margaret Cruikshank's *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* dis-

cusses “Lesbian Feminism from the 1970s to the 1990s,” indicating the author’s sense that the movement is still vital, if in a different form or forms than it took in the 1970s (154–60). Contrary to Stein’s narrative of the decline of radical lesbianism in the 1980s, Cruikshank asserts that “the broad lesbian feminist movement gained momentum” during the 1980s and diversified, serving it well in the face of a massive right-wing backlash (157). Where Stein and Faderman see a new political movement, Cruikshank sees an evolution of lesbian feminism. Similarly, Carol Anne Douglas assumes the importance of radical and lesbian feminisms. She presents a veritable primer on their multiple strains of thought in her book *Love and Politics: Radical Feminist and Lesbian Theories*. As opposed to the historians, Douglas uses present-tense verbs to lay out a body of political theory that she describes as current and thriving.

Despite their different assessments of lesbian feminism’s continuing impact, all the recent histories of 1970s lesbian feminism generalize from the separatist, white (downwardly mobile) middle-class aspects of the movement. Most accounts claim that lesbian feminism died of its own political correctness around 1980, giving way to pluralistic coalition politics. The division by decade seems too neat, however. Historical shifts are rarely so abrupt.¹⁰ While criticisms of militant lesbian-feminist didacticism are often well-founded, they are usually also based on generalization, if not outright stereotype. Claiming that lesbian politics belonged to white women in the 1970s and to women of color in the eighties denies the persistence of lesbian feminism in the 1980s (and nineties) and ignores white women’s continuing privilege; it also overlooks the participation and leadership of women of color in lesbian politics and culture in the 1970s. Historians of lesbian feminism have so far failed to tell stories centered on the many working-class lesbians/lesbians of color who were in fact instrumental to the movement—from the beginning, and increasingly by the late 1970s.

Most representations of lesbian feminism suffer from what white feminist philosopher Elizabeth Spelman has termed “Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought” (*Inessential Woman*). Spelman explains that in order to discuss women “as women” feminism has ignored “the heterogeneity of women” (*Inessential Woman*, ix) and/or added race and class as categories of analysis separate from gender. Thus what social constructionists have called gender essentialism Spelman recognizes as a racist, classist focus on white, middle-class women, as if their experience were somehow about gender alone. This leads to the phenomenon Spelman names, in the subtitle to a chapter of her book *Inessential Woman*, “The Ampersand Problem in Feminist Thought,”

the addition of “race & class” (and I would add, “& sexuality”) to the analytical category of gender. The ampersand problem implies that gender & race & class & sexuality are separate categories that can be “piled upon each other” (123). Spelman demonstrates that categories of identity and/or oppression “must be seen as interlocking” (123) since, for example, “sexism and racism do not have different ‘objects’ in the case of Black women” (122)—calling to mind the title of the breakthrough anthology of black women’s studies, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some Of Us Are Brave*.

Gender essentialism and the ampersand problem obscure the fact that white women experience sexism in the context of white skin privilege, whereas women of color experience sexism in the context of racism (and vice versa). In this sense, then, there are sexism(s), plural. Spelman explains,

We cannot automatically conclude that the sexism all women experience is the same. We have to understand what one’s oppression “as a woman” means in each case. . . . Moreover, we cannot describe what it is to be subject to several forms of oppression, say, sexism and racism and classism, by adding together their separate accounts (14).

Because gender is constructed and experienced differently in conjunction with various races/classes/ethnicities/sexualities, in an important sense there exist a variety of genders. Hence, à la Fuss, gender essentialism must be seen as a specific—racist, classist—construction of gender.

Spelman lambastes white feminist attempts to deal with “the problem of difference,” pointing out that the “problem” is really one of privilege (162). She examines three typical, well-intentioned statements that inadvertently serve to reinscribe white, straight women as the central topic of feminist inquiry:

1. Feminist theory must take differences among women into consideration.
2. We need to hear the many voices of women.
3. Feminist theory must include more of the experiences of women of different races and classes (162–63).

Statement number 1 preserves the division between feminist theorists and women from whom they differ, making clear that feminist theory as currently constituted does not include women who are “different” from the presumed

white, heterosexual, middle-class norm. "Take . . . into consideration" is echoed in the "we" of statement number 2. Who are "we"? Or, as African American poet Lorraine Bethel so clearly puts it in the title to her 1979 essay "What Chou Mean *We*, White Girl?" Statement number 3 reveals the power of those who might (or might not) choose to "include" women somehow different from themselves. "Welcoming someone into one's own home doesn't represent an attempt to undermine privilege," Spelman explains, "it expresses it" (*Inessential Woman*, 163).

When "inclusion" is the goal of a feminist and/or lesbian study, the ampersand problem is often the result. Typically, a chapter about a given topic as it relates to "women" (of the essentialized variety) concludes with a section describing how the same topic affects women of color, working-class women, and/or lesbians. That issues of race, class, and/or sexuality appear at all is of course an improvement over earlier (or sometimes contemporary but merely worse) renditions of topics in women's studies. But this is akin to saying that sitting in the back of the bus is better than having to walk; the Montgomery Bus Boycott demonstrated otherwise. The fact remains that most accounts of women in relation to whatever particular topic take women to include only white, straight, and middle-class women, unless the explicit focus of the work is women of color, working-class women, lesbians, or some combination of these categories. But the problem is rarely solved there either.

Although Spelman's ideas on some level may seem obvious, much historical writing about lesbian-feminism replicates earlier models, now perpetrating "problems of exclusion" in *lesbian* thought—despite, and sometimes because of, white historians' attempts to be inclusive. For example, Faderman discusses "lesbians"—and then lesbians of color. Reviewing *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Estelle Freedman points out that Faderman is particularly attentive to class distinctions but tends to subsume "race . . . under class in her discussion." Freedman further suggests that because of the availability of sources Faderman mistakenly considers "white, educated, professional women [to be] the vanguard of the emergence of modern lesbianism" (16).

Few white lesbian historians ignore outright the "problems of exclusion" of race and class, although most perpetuate them in some way. In her first chapter, Carol Anne Douglas calls attention to racism and her own white skin privilege, listing the names of white women whom she discusses throughout her book, "so that whiteness will not be seen as the norm." She adds, "I am white, as well" (Douglas, *Love*, 18). An admirable attempt, perhaps, but from there the book persists mainly in ampersand mode (with the exception of the chapter on separatism, where the critique of lesbians of

color is fully integrated). Cruikshank's narrative of modern lesbianism is peppered with isolated references to well-known lesbians of color, includes a thoughtful section on the challenge to lesbian-feminist conformity by lesbians of color in the 1980s, and ultimately focuses on "lesbians" (quote/unquote). That is, back to square one. Faderman makes passing mention of lesbians of color who were politically active in the 1970s (*Odd Girls*, 220, 235, 242), but she only takes up their stories in a brief section about racism in the predominantly white movement of the 1970s (240–43) and in another about the "Validation of Diversity" in the 1980s (284–92). In "Sisters and Queers," Stein argues that lesbian-feminist ideology suppressed differences to such an extent that relatively few lesbians of color identified as "lesbian feminists" (45). Despite this insight, the essay focuses on women who according to Stein did identify as lesbian feminists, implying that what she considers important about the 1970s is the political activism of white women. While these accounts all deal in some ways with white lesbian-feminist racism, none take seriously the study of the lives and politics of lesbians of color before the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1981. All imply that lesbian feminism was created and sustained by white, middle-class women alone.

In their revaluation of the political agency of working-class lesbian bar culture in the 1940s and fifties, historians Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis explain,

Joan Nestle, Audre Lorde, and Judy Grahn, all of whom related to some aspect of working-class lesbian communities in the 1950s, give us the beginnings of a new tradition, one that portrays working-class lesbians as creating lesbian culture and resisting oppression in the context of a severely oppressive environment. (*Boots of Leather*, 14)

These three working-class-identified lesbians—one of whom is African American, another Jewish—continued to be instrumental to the creation of lesbian-feminist culture in the 1970s. At a time when historians see a white, Protestant, middle-class movement, Nestle, Lorde, and Grahn were drawing on their diverse racial and ethnic identities and on the working-class lesbian culture of an earlier era while simultaneously laying the groundwork for the diversity typically associated with the 1980s and nineties.

Ample evidence shows that working-class/lesbians of color were active in lesbian feminism and the women's liberation movement in the 1970s. Chela Sandoval explains that women of color were both active within and "at odds

with" white feminism "from the beginning of what has been known as the second wave of the women's movement" ("U.S.," 4). Among the early lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual feminists of color she cites are African Americans Francis Beal and Toni Morrison, Asian Americans Mitsuye Yamada and Nellie Wong, Native American Paula Gunn Allen, and Chicana Velia Hancock (4, 9). Similarly, Judy Grahn describes the diversity of the women involved in the women's and lesbian-feminist movements on the West Coast as early as 1969, including black lesbians, Asian American lesbians, "Jewish radical Lesbians," and women "from the European folk 'marginal culture' known variously as lower class, working class, white trash" (Seajay, "Women-in-Print Movement," 25; Grahn, *Highest*, xviii). Discussing "class oppression" in 1970, activist Robin Morgan wrote in the introduction to *Sisterhood Is Powerful* that "a large percentage of the movement comes from working-class backgrounds" (xxx).¹¹

The "Combahee River Collective Statement," issued in 1977 by a group of black feminists and lesbians who had been meeting and organizing since 1974, points out that the National Black Feminist Organization was formed in 1973 as a result of racism and elitism in the women's liberation movement: "Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation" (272-73). In "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" collective member Barbara Smith notes the existence in 1977 of "at least one Black lesbian writers' collective, Jemima," as well as a handful of groundbreaking black lesbian writers and critics, despite the predominance of white feminists' literature and criticism in print (175, 172-73). *Azalea*, a literary magazine for Third World lesbians, was launched the same year that the "Combahee River Collective Statement" and Smith's essay were published (Morse and Larkin, "Introduction," xxi). At least seventeen other periodicals by and for women of color were publishing in the 1970s.¹²

Asian American poet Willyce Kim recalls that it was difficult to find other lesbian feminists of color in the early 1970s in the San Francisco Bay Area, although she did work with African American poet Pat Parker and knew at least one other Asian American lesbian writer. Parker herself, in "Have You Ever Tried to Hide?" her often quoted poem first published in 1973 about racism in the women's movement, describes not only white racism but also the "pain" and "silent rage" she encounters in "the other Blacks" present at a feminist political meeting (Parker, *Movement in Black*, 47). Tiana Arruda remembers the 1970s as the time when she first connected with "many

women of color," including other Latina lesbians, through her participation in a variety of feminist organizations in California. Darlene Pagano, a white working-class-identified women's bookstore activist, insists on recognition of the many working-class women involved in the women's movement and lesbian feminism from the late 1960s on. The "Lesbian Feminist Declaration of 1976" presents a movement vitally concerned with race, class, age, imperialism, and the environment. Its authors, "representatives of the Dykes for an Amerikan Revolution," call for "social and economic revolution," claiming "full power to levy war against sexism, racism, classism and all other oppressions. We declare solidarity with all who struggle for liberation."

Diversity is where you look for it, and as the Combahee River Collective pointed out, white middle-class historians seem to be looking the other way. Intent on telling the story of lesbians "as lesbians" in the 1970s, they give short shrift to the many working-class/lesbians of color active within and around lesbian feminism, missing the story behind the multicultural lesbian and feminist explosion of the 1980s. Sandoval argues that women of color are erased by typologies of "white hegemonic feminism" because women of color often have operated "between and among" the organizations and strategies of resistance commonly associated with the white feminist movement.

This unusual affiliation with the movement was variously interpreted as disloyalty, betrayal, absence or lack: "When they *were* there, they were rarely there for long" went the usual complaint, or "they seemed to shift from one type of women's group to another." They were the mobile (yet ever present in their "absence") members of this particular liberation movement. It is precisely the significance of this mobility which most inventories of oppositional ideology cannot register ("U.S.," 13-14).

Sandoval outlines the "typology" that "comprises the mental map of . . . the U.S. white women's movement" and argues persuasively that the accepted discourse of that movement "sets limits on how the history of feminist activity can be conceptualized, while obstructing what can be perceived or even imagined by agents thinking within its constraints" ("U.S.," 10). Yolanda Chávez Leyva concurs in her essay "Breaking the Silence: Putting Latina Lesbian History at the Center," explaining that "Latina lesbian history challenges a number of . . . aspects of the Anglo-lesbian paradigm of the emergence of modern lesbian identity," such as urbanization, economic opportunities, "a public culture that allows lesbians to find each other; and finally, the eroticization of individuals by intellectuals who view sexuality as central to a person's iden-

tity. These factors take on difference meanings and nuances, not yet fully understood, when we look at Latina lesbian experiences in the United States" (149). In short, "Latina lesbian history puts Latina lesbians at the center" (151). We might say, conversely, that white lesbian history, which just about everyone simply calls, "lesbian history," puts white lesbians at the center, acting as if lesbians of color did not attend the party, fight at the barricades, or form lesbian identities until the 1980s. Taxonomies of lesbian and queer theory similarly exclude working-class/lesbians of color, relegating their work to other domains. As Sharon Holland explains, "The 'colored girls' do all the soul work of the discipline, and the white women shell out the theories that decide how this soul work is going to be read, disseminated, and taught in juxtaposition to already canonized white lesbian authors" ("(White) Lesbian Studies," 250). Tiana Arruda sums up the problem of exclusion in lesbian-feminist thought when she recalls that the 1981 publication of *This Bridge Called My Back* was "the end" result of years of activism by working-class/lesbians of color, "not the beginning."